

TOWARD A UNIFIED THEORY OF LEADERSHIP

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TOWARD A UNIFIED
THEORY OF LEADERSHIP

This white paper was written at our request and in preparation for Professor Wright's optional MBA seminar on Leadership: Entrepreneurship and Productivity. It represents the opening passages of a book-length essay being developed on the subject by the contributor.

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Theory of Leadership

The chapter here presented is the opening essay of a book planned to include the topics that follow:

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The Powerful Human Organization

Curious thing about organizations of people. Even though two or more are supposed to function equally well, that's not the way they work. Some units, after they are formed and function develop an immense power to do well whatever they set forth to do, others are average, while other units are flat-out inferior (and those inferior ones continue to plod along wasting a society's resources ad-infinitum nauseum if they are being compared to or competing against other weak ones -- or of course slogging along alone as a monopoly.) Even when everything imaginably manageable is designed to produce homogeneity of function and output -- structure, systems, processes, rules, and all -- neither happen. Instead, indeed, organizations acquire tribal-like idiosyncrasies that distort functional likeness: Organizations generate different rates of power to drive them toward their common purpose so that output differs.

To see clearly this curiosity, picture yourself on a platform raising up above a parade field. Imagine further that an infantry company is marshalled on the horizontal plane of that field in full battle dress and divided into three sub-units called platoons. You are initially stuck by the sameness of the three units functionally. Each has been designed with the same complement of people, with like composites of training and experience, with platoon leaders and squad leaders, the same technology, same specialization or division of labor, and to vex you into confusing form with substance further, all participants are dressed alike -- uniformly, if you will. (If you merely add, a company commander and picture the formation

tilted up to a vertical plane from its horizontal one, you now have a classical organization chart.) You assess initially that if, say, Able Platoon is to Baker Platoon as Baker Platoon is to Charlie Platoon, thus then that either Able, Baker, or Charlie Platoons can function so as to do the same job.

But that assessment is made without enlightening insights from the overall company commander. Tell me about the units under your command, you ask. Able Platoon, he responds, generally meets mission requirements with an acceptable level of losses, both equipment and people. The leader of the company is responding clearly that Able is an average unit. How about Baker, you urge? Here, the Company head can scarcely hide the wince of displeasure that his expression only fleetingly reveals. We have problems with Baker Platoon, he confides, and we're not dealing here with random malfunctions but rather with repeating problems of a systemic or organic nature. (Here, the officer divulges to you the wise side from his years of command -- the ability to incisively separate isolated aberrations from repetitious patterns.) Baker Platoon has an on-going history of missing requirements in the field. And when its mission is accomplished, losses of people and equipment are unacceptably high. We have a lot to do to bring that unit up to minimal essentials, he concludes.

How does Charlie Platoon perform, you ask finally. Charlie Platoon is perhaps the most impressive unit I have ever had the pleasure to command, he responds with a joyful twinkle of authorship in his eye. It is unheard of for Charlie Platoon to miss its mission requirements and in attaining its military objective the unit does so with only a minimum loss of people or equipment. The Commander obviously is sharing with you his understandable

happiness with having a superior organization within the scope of his command.

Contemplate in passing: What type of soldiers try to get into Charlie Platoon? And what type of people try to get the hell out?

Turn your thoughts now to another type of organization. Consider a favored or even favorite athletic team to you -- any team sport -- soccer, baseball, football, basketball, whatever. And, you pick the team, whether it is amateur or professional, university or other. Do you have the team in mind? Notice something here analogous to the earlier military example. Season after season certain teams are prime contenders for regional or national honors, while others reside in the mediocre zone, with still others sharing the cellar as losers. Here we are referring to weakness in a steady state of equilibrium as a weak entity, where only some major change (usually the coaching staff) is sufficiently emphatic to nudge the mal-performer to a better place.

So, it is also with business organizations. At GTE we had some 33 operating districts in California, all designed to achieve the same goals with resources, systems, processes, people and all poised to pounce at the corporate bogey. Yet some always made it, some never made it, and others never reached those extremes. Look around you. There are some businesses that are imminently eminent, others are OK, and some should have been pensioned-off and sent to Florida to retire, as John W. Gardner observed.

Element of a Superior Human Organization

To develop a model of a truly superior human organization, one

that produces in an exemplary way whatever it sets forth to produce - a drama, a symphony, a game, medical care, a rock concert, or a product or service - one asks one's experts. The "experts" used here were successful, seasoned managers from countless enterprises in a large number of management development seminars held across the nation.

Where does it all begin, this "superior organization"? The query inescapably swings to Leadership. It seems axiomatic that the process must begin with a leader. But the search must continue to explore, "which leader?" Does it have to be the leader of the overall, supra organization? Some conclude yes, some no, some mute. We can conclude that support of superior performance from the top is immensely helpful, but is it indispensable? It becomes clear finally that superior performance can emerge at any level, in any functional speciality. It is thus the leader over the supra or sub-unit where the process of necessity begins. We are now developing the model, or "Elements of a Superior Human Organizational Unit." And it is the leader of that unit who is the catalyst.

It is well to remind ourselves here of the level of performance of the line infantry company used earlier as an example. What was its performance as a unit? Momentary reflection reveals that it was an average organization, algebraically, with Able Platoon average, Baker weak and Charlie superior. Hence, when one looks for causes of excellent performance in otherwise homogeneous units, one looks to the critical differentiating variable of leadership. Here, we look to the platoon leader of Charlie.

This recognition of the fount of performance as residing with the leader at the operational level can be invaluable; it affixes accountability. Some leaders would like to languish in a state of victimized non-control.

There are some who would like to believe that their unit is weak necessarily because it is a part of a weak supra, or overall organization. Not true. Though as stated, support for superior performance is most helpful if it permeates throughout the enterprise, it can pop-up with the right sort of leader in oft-times the most unlikely of sub-units. For instance, the most rotten of firms may have a mailroom operation that is impeccable. So this acknowledgement of where accountability resides, in a word, pinpoints the initial source of excellence -- or its opposite. It convincingly disqualifies victimization as the reason for weak performance.

So it begins. We now search for elements that are successively caused by the unit's leader. His or her initial responsibilities to the unit and its people come quickly to the minds of seasoned organizational veterans. The first condition that the leader must derive and gain acceptance to is the mission, the goal or goals, Common Purpose.

Indeed, common purpose is the initial rallying point and the rationale for the design of organizations for all human endeavor. The mere suggestion of some sort of commonality is quite enough for we naturally social creatures to coalesce and structure. With the example of an athletic team mentioned earlier losing sight of the goal required to win is nearly unheard of. With the example of the military infantry company, there is generally a consensus of views on the mission required to win a battle. But alas in business firms, there is often confusion among employees not only where the enterprise is headed, but also in what business they're actually involved. This is especially true when a company pursues a whole hierarchy of pronounced to subtle goals, rather than the straight forward single-minded simplicity of scoring in a game or of winning a skirmish or

battle.

In another important way, acceptance of the common purpose differs in utilitarian or economic units from the emotional appeals of goals embraced by charitable, cultural, religious or philanthropic enterprises. With those institutional purposes that are charged with intrinsic psychological persuasions, a goal can easily be intimately endorsed by all participants. For instance, an institute's goal to help blind people to learn through audio recordings of technical material may be sweepingly adopted by all members, professionals and volunteers. Yet a business venture of like size designed to make and sell soap likely lacks such appeals to bring on spontaneous and pronounced bonding. In such cases, employees may elect to count themselves as contributors for a plethora of good reasons, none of which address squarely the purpose of making and selling soap. Some work solely to make money, others work for status, still others like to be with others working, some produce to be known as producers and a few actually may be enamoured with making and selling soap. It makes little difference. If in fulfilling each of the employee's individual common purposes the common purpose of the firm is reached well, the underlying motives for the workers' support is of little concern to leaders, but rather of intrigue to psychologists and philosophers.

But a leader with a goal, or common purpose is scarcely specific enough to produce chordal orchestration with people. How does a member of the unit know precisely what she or he is expected to do? Common purpose of the overall organization provides only imprecise, general direction. Yet, workers have a right to know what their leader expects of them, i.e. the institutionalized demands to which they must respond. This prescription fulfills a worker's right: The right to know what the boss expects of them.

So, a clarity of expectations is needed. It is usually communication, informally, by the leader letting his or her desires known by subordinates, or formally, with sub-goals, job descriptions, policies, procedures, methods, rules and so on. Yet this element - clear expectations - requires further definition if the leader's unit is to reach the goal of superior performance. What is the level of expectation required to reach superior performance? Obviously superior -- at least, high -- expectations of each participant is essential. If average, even less, is expected by the leader, workers will probably respond in kind. Herein resides a major barrier to building superior organizational units -- at the bottom or at the top. Some people in positions of leadership fail to believe in the potential of people. They expect and accept only ho-hum performance from others (and themselves) and that's exactly what they get. If we are to expect superior performance from our organizations we must first have leaders who expect nothing less from individual performers. Hence the fully stated element of a superior organization is High, Clear Expectations.

The Human Factor - The stage has been laid out well: Now the leader plays casting director by adding life to the structure of the drama to unfold. The attributes of the players in this to be superior production deserve careful attention by the leader.

First, our experts concern themselves with the skills required by the role players to fulfill each part. The number of parts are dictated by the fineness of the division of labor, the narrowness of specialization. Authorities readily acknowledge the requirement for people able -- with skills, knowledge, dexterity, strength, taste, judgement, or whatever -- to meet the challenge of thoroughly

fulfilling the responsibilities of discharging their jobs that are essential to efficiently meet the common purpose, or goal(s). Supervision organizations are comprised of members who are Technically Competent. Our managerial practicing managers are harder pressed to admit a second indispensable quality needed among participants: They must also be behaviorally competent, adequate, confident. Why, the experts are asked, do you want staff members to be good -- technically -- and know that they are good -- behaviorally?

Here it is well to report that a number of management people do not want confident subordinates. They fear boastfulness, cochinness, even arrogance. What some managers really fear is that they will lose power because their employees' wills are greater than are theirs. So, a boss's daily rounds would include giving solid doses of feelings of inadequacy to employees to keep them in their relegative places. On better, the boss may hire inadequate people, rather than those best put-together behaviorally to do a supervision job. At least then the supervisor won't be threatened by his workers' self-sufficiency. The record on the frequency of this mis-managerial tendency may be frightening.

Yet fortunately most men and women in management now acknowledge the indispensable virtues of having "whole" people, if the job demands the totality from producers. And this condition is particularly common of late as more and more we ask people to think as well as to do.

Managers sense that Individually Confident people are more able in at least four ways. First, they are accountable largely for their own motivation. Second, they are less dependent on others, including their boss. Third, they make decisions. And fourth, they can afford, psychologically, to be more innovative. Hence in playing

most parts in the organization confident people play them more skillfully, although they are often more tedious to lead.

The leader who needs self-confident people has to re-evaluate the meaning of the practice of management by exception. The "exception principle," so-called, merely means that only exceptional performance -- different because it is so high or so low -- when compared to expected output warrants attention. But too frequently the idea has become one of managing only by negative exception, i.e. only trouble spots or "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mentality. Well, leading people to excellence -- or better said, nurturing the healthful culture wherein people's best performance is supported -- requires leaders who continuously acknowledge positive events, as well. For instance, certain people in positions of leadership state that they actively support building subordinates' confidence in their contribution. Yet when you listen to their employees' side by asking, "When did you hear last from the boss?" they reflect and respond, "Not for some time now, so I guess everything's going OK." When does the worker hear from the boss, one concludes? When things are going badly. Management by negative exception. If leaders are to give organizational excellence more than popular lip-service, they will have to acknowledge good news with the same exuberance they have historically paid to bad news. At least, keep management by exception in balance. Indeed proponents of behavior modification processes opt to keep the exception principle in imbalance on the positive side. That is, manage what you want, not what you don't want.

The formal structure is now in place with the right sort of people lead by the appropriate sort of leader giving a clear idea to

workers of the high performance expected of them to coherently reach the unit goal. The unit awaits in a steady structural state an order to function dynamically.

At this point in the organization's design, it is a static set of expectations and people prepared to perform to meet those expectations -- the formation of soldiers awaiting the command, the athletic team at attention to the pre-game playing of the national anthem, the factory workers at their positions a moment before the whistle announcing the shift's beginning is sounded. It is the need of the unit for sound interaction, or dynamism, that causes successful leaders to view sound interpersonal relationships as the next step to create a powerful organizational unit.

Human Interactions - If an organization is expected to produce more than the sum of its parts, or resources -- and good ones do -- then productive interactions are the keys to success. These socio-psychological linkages provide the essential sense to structure.

Veteran managers are thus quick to recognize the need for close cooperation. They call the desired element, Teamwork. Though an indispensable ingredient to superb performance, our experts often miss some subtle meanings to providing this element.

First, though a number of managers who hold the contention firmly that team play or teamwork is required also place the workers (players) in competitive, not cooperative, tension with each other. Rather than cohesive bonding, they create isolation and antagonism. And although there are advantages and disadvantages to both cooperation and competition in human groups, if teamwork is critical it should not be preempted. Some units at work flat-out create alienation as a necessary byproduct of the win/lose type of game. Although other

teams prepare for action by competing against each other, as in mock battles and inter-team skirmishes, re-established teamwork is demanded when the high performance of conflict and competition are demanded. Thus, if say a football team tolerated the degree of in-fighting on game day that certain business units display, the interception by a defensive back of an errant pass would be cut down by a tackle from another D-back on the same team. Ludicrous! If teamwork is needed, and that's what we are told, the players at work will be rewarded and controlled to cooperate, not to combat.

Second, seasoned veterans also tend to view the element of teamwork as an effect of something, rather than as having been caused by related conditions. They seem to believe also that people can be ordered to relate closely in teamwork, which seems somewhat suspect since although some people bond tightly with others, they do so highly discriminately. They are selective in their choice of comrades, and the "choice" is made for key reasons. Thus we ask our experts, "Who are those special people with whom we bond as team members?"

Our seasoned management experts are also convinced that some high order of the willingness and ability of open communication is also indispensable; Openness between all members of the unit and their leader. Surely if the organization is to flourish only by a team spirit and team-member involvement, then communications would be spontaneous, multi-directional, ubiquitous. Yet that desirable flow of influence often fails. In some organizations, indeed, rather than an openness, a "closedness" seems to exist, wherein people seem somehow secretive. Perhaps this reticence to communicate is sensible in a competitive, not a cooperative or team-oriented section. Why tell your competition one's trade secrets, i.e. does

Ginlees tell Macy's?

But open communication is a requisite to superior organizational performance. Indeed if an adversary wants to impair organizational success, communications lines are cut. When communications are faulty in a team apart, some unexpected (even hilarious) misuses result. When communications are impaired within a military unit, the result can be defeat. So, when communications are flawed in organizations set forth to reach other kinds of goals, performance will also be sacrificed.

But as desired teamwork depends on underlying causes to social facilitation, so does openness. In a like way, people are also selective, oft-times highly selective as to whom they listen (with care) and to whom they transmit. So the search for underlying causes of openness begins as it did earlier with teamwork with a question on so. Who are those particular people with whom you strive to communicate how you think and feel? From whom do you withhold? Or in the next section, let us examine the requisites necessary to produce positive, close human interaction.

Causes of Intense Integration - Individuals are drawn together in organizations partially by activities that are interdependent and by dependence with those persons above and below. But these bonds are nominal contrasted to those experienced in deeply powerful involvements, such as, by a set of mountain climbers, the Roman Takeumale Choin, a Charley "The Bird" Parker jazz combo, the Botshoi Ballet Company, or a crack U.S. Marine drill team. In these, individual contributions are fired by deep feelings of member devotion

to the unit they have selected to serve.

Sound interactions begin with people who are dedicated, and loyal to each other in the unit, including the leader. It is a matter of being concerned with one's own contribution as well as others within the unit and the overall unit. With this sense of positive identification by participants with each other and the unit's progress, performance is self-imposed primarily, peer-imposed secondarily, and leader-imposed only tertiary. This identity, concern, dedication, commitment, and whatever, we shall attribute to the invaluable basic feelings of Mutual Caring.

The idea of caring among members can help to bring about the teamwork and openness seen as required earlier. Yet people seasoned in managing healthy organizations also know that such feelings also provide the behavioral understructure for needed competition, conflict (aggression), and confrontation. When practicing leaders accept the notion of mutual caring, it is for practical not maudlin reasons. People who care for each other can withstand the psychological buffeting to face and resolve disagreements, to look at good news and bad news alike, to tell a fellow worker what he or she needs to know not simply what the other wants to hear. If there is a need in human intercourse for "tough love" to help a loved one, then this element might be thought of as "tough caring" in organizations.

Another cause of healthy interpersonal relations is Mutual Trust. It is essential also for openness and teamwork as is mutual caring. Together they are required to set a healthful behavioral milieu from which healthy behavioral integration of effort comes.

Consider the type of person with whom you work hard to communicate candidly. Who is that person? A spouse, lover, friend, parent or

child? We work hard to be congruent -- or real -- with those persons we care for, often deeply, and trust, often boundlessly. So trust seems to lead to communications, distrust or lack of trust to bounded communications. Without communications, even a loose network of

cooperative amalgam is tenuous. But with it, dramatic accomplishments are made possible. Picture a formation of an aerial jet stunt team performing one of its breathtaking maneuvers, let's say flashing. (The instant, collective switch of direction of flight that a flock of birds, such as pigeons, does). Without the mutual concern and trust leading to teamwork and openness of communications, this type of men/machines magic would be impossible. With it, however, aerial acrobatics take place with precision and grace, leaving mishaps as a rare consequence.

One of the problems in leadership is the barrier to openness between boss and subordinate that can so easily be erected -- even inadvertently. Consider a set of long-standing fellow workers from which one is promoted to lead the former peer group. As one-of-the-boys or girls, communications was vibrant, high, intimate. Everyone was open with everyone else. Beyond facts, feelings about things were shared: Beyond the rankings of who knows what and the status hierarchy. Who fears what, who hopes for what, who is angered by what, who is brought joy by what, and on and on. The candidate for a leadership position was an active, integral part of that natural "tribe," but then something seemingly unnatural occurred. The change was double-barreled. First, a peer was lost; and second, a superior was gained. Soon on the new leader searches-out my partner, an industrial psychologist, to lament his feelings of newly-found isolation. Somehow, he figures he's becoming out of touch with his own people. How can this be so? He was so close with them so

long. Beyond petty jealousies, our hero is kept insulated from one unsure, uncertain, untrusting, and anxious as to how, when and upon whom is shall be used. The club is power -- power to criticize, penalize, and in sum, to make working life miserable. So until his people are assured -- by actions, not words -- of his applications, the awkward word will continue.

You see, we are immensely prepared and able to communicate with nearly anyone, but we may not be willing to do so. If anyone should pick up a club, even if he isn't using it, we will likely be unwilling to be as open as to a person unarmed. Leaders often do not flout the threat or misuse it. Indeed, some try to hide the club by defusing subordinates into believing that he can somehow make it disappear. But this is not going to happen because there shall come that time when the club of power will be used. The least thing for our fledgling supervisor to do is to flout, use the authority when justified for positive acts -- power to applaud, reward, and in sum, to make working life dignified. Second, his use of his newly-won power must be used -- for negative acts on positive deeds -- with assiduous equity, if trust is to be restored.

The intense bonding required in a superson wit is also brought on by the condition of Mutual Respect. It is the only way in which we can get desired discord from people with differentiated positions for decision-making and the required accord from people for the integration to get action after decisions are made. Organizations contain programmed points of antagonistic stress; quality control vs. production control, funds preservation vs. spend-it-to-make-it, stable efficiency vs. destabilizing change. So if one has a sales promotional person who is continuously harmonious with the budget

person, there's a likely chance that one of them, or both, is not doing the job needed. The sales promoter has a distinct responsibility to spend it to make it; the budgeter has a fiduciary responsibility to assure prudent use of company resources. So, the scene for corporate conflagration -- conflict and compromise -- is set. And such "battles" are indispensably useful where each function is valuable to the enterprise. The same type of engagement occurs between the countervailing ends of quantity produced and quality produced. Each is needed in some order and it is often up to the Q.C. person and the Production Control head to forge-out a balance.

Yet after the dust settles from these necessary behavioral sorties and mêlées, the combatants are supposed to ignore the past and join arms in the spirit of team play, without so much as an armistice or peace treaty for closure. Unlikely.

If, however, they respect each other in their respective and highly different positions, they can disagree but also appreciate the other person's point of view. For instance, in the example of the sales promotion manager just given, she quite likely will walk away from the budgeting director with less than wanted when she walked in. But even though she may smart from the "defeat," with respect for her adversary she would be able to accept that if the roles had been reversed she would have done the same thing. Mutual respect gives congruence and resilience to interpersonal relations. Without the strength it gives to human interactions, people are afraid to confront issues with each other for fear that their relationship is too fragile to take a hit of disharmony. In response, the truth is avoided if threatened, issues that should be addressed are hidden and a sick dance of avoidance tiptoes between the emotional landmines of otherwise resolvable issues. And this ritual can ruin

any relationship -- one called the J.P. Fredrickson Company or one called Mr. and Mrs. J.P. Fredrickson.

These mutualities -- of caring, trust, and respect -- give human bonds strength across the organization, up and down the organization. These decisions set the psychological tone for teamwork and openness, so understandably viewed as essentials to a successful venture by our "expert" managers.

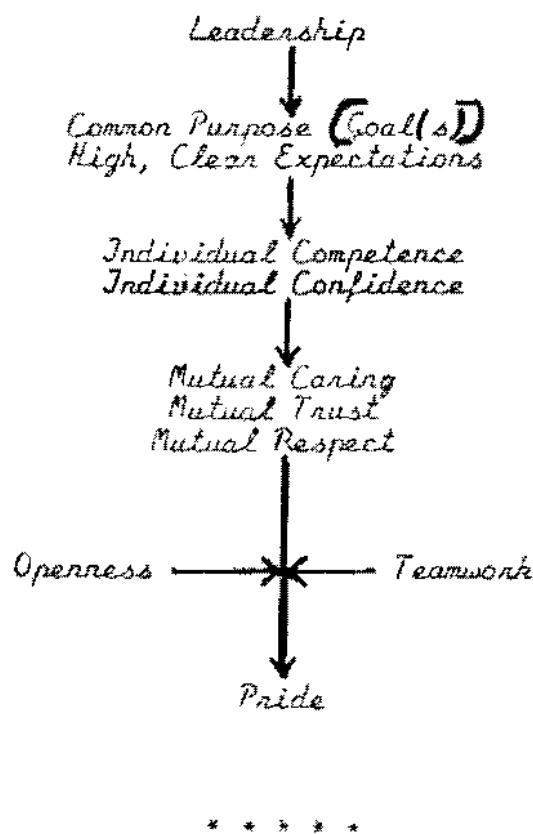
And where do these several mutualities of caring, trust, and respect begin, we inquire gently, with the leader, the followers, or do they somehow jump forth at the same moment? Let's see, the pros reason. Coincident implosions of such tender feelings seem unlikely. Such displays of vulnerability by have-nots to haves in power relationships is frightening. For instance, if I trust the boss with him in power, I may be wrong and hurt myself. They, thus, conclude if such mutualities occur randomly with those in secure positions -- they can only begin with the leader.

The Payoff - The battlefield is stilled, the playing field abandoned, the factory or office vacant. The organization, even our superior one, disbands. It is gone. Only the individual players remain. Only they are left with their sensations about themselves and their organization. Consider those persons who were fortunate enough to have been a part of a victorious unit. How do they feel about themselves and their organization? The conquering hero? The heralded athlete? The winning businessperson? The feeling, is clear among seasoned managers; it is Pride.

Yet, this assumes that the players are aware that it's their organization and they are victors. In the examples of combat and

sports, victory or defeat is usually distinguishable by the players. But in enterprises with less precise standards -- such as, businesses, governments and academe -- players may not even know that they are a part of a winning venture. Hence, it is little surprise that the accompanying feelings of deep pride and warming victory celebrations are missing. So if the experts are correct in believing that superior organizational units are comprised of prideful performers, then really someone should tell the people if it's so. It would seem incumbent upon the leader of the unit to dispatch this pleasant task.

Summary - There then are the elements of a powerful human organization that produces superiorly whatever it produces. The credibility of its features are confirmed by management experts in practice and by distinguished scholars. Shown graphically the essential elements of the unit assume the following final form:



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